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**CREATING AN ONLINE SCHOLARLY  
EDITION: THE PROBLEMS POSED  
BY *CLOTEL*, THE FIRST  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN NOVEL**

CHRISTOPHER MULVEY\*

*Clotel; or the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* by William Wells Brown is the first published African-American novel, and it appeared in London in 1853. In 1849, Brown had traveled to Paris to attend the International Peace Conference and to make a lecture tour of the British Isles. In 1850, the United States' Fugitive Slave Act had exiled him in London because he was a Kentucky-born escaped slave. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* had been published to enormous success in Boston and London. In 1853, Brown was reacting to that success. In fact, his novel was published by Partridge and Oakey, one of several London publishers to produce an edition of Stowe's novel.

In 1854, abolitionists paid off the man who claimed to be Brown's master, and Brown returned to the United States. In 1860 he arranged with Thomas Hamilton, the editor of the New York *Weekly Anglo-African*, to produce a novel announced as *Miralda, or The Beautiful Quadroon: A Romance of American Slavery Founded on Fact* to be published in sixteen installments starting on Dec. 1, 1860. Although a tagline at the start of each installment claims that the novel was "Written for the Anglo African," the story of *Miralda* is that of *Clotel*. Brown published this story twice more. In 1864, the Boston abolitionist publisher James Redpath issued it as

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*Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States*, and in 1867, another Boston publisher, the prestigious Lee & Shepard, issued the novel as *Clotelle; or the Colored Heroine. A Tale of the Southern States*.

Those four equivalent but greatly variant versions of the same work raise problems that are both theoretical and practical. They are problems which modern editions have not addressed since they have invariably taken the route of publishing one isolated version of the *Clotel* story, sometimes with no reference to the fact that it is one of four and that a serious editorial choice has been made for electing one version over the others. The questions raised by variant texts are not questions limited to *Clotel* nor to Brown; however, they are more regularly raised in relation to the editing of works like Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, both of which exist in radically different versions.

*Clotel's* publishing history represents an unusual case among early African-American novels. Of the first one hundred, only a very few exist in more than one form, and single-copy novels do not give rise to the kind of textual, biographical, editorial issues associated with establishing a true or authoritative text. The manuscripts, galleys, proof copies, later editions, and re-print versions which exist for Anglo-American writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne or Herman Melville have not been found for African-American novelists before Charles Chesnutt. Records of black, working-class writers did not survive, and there is nothing surprising in that. The poor are not normally able to preserve paper from one generation to the next. In fact the situation with William Wells Brown is remarkable only because he published the same text four times. There are no manuscripts, corrections, or proofs. But there are those four versions, and they mean that the first African-American novel exists in four forms.

The *Clotel* problem thus posed takes two forms: what are the limits of the work, and how is it to be presented? The first is an intellectual problem; the second is a practical one. A radical solution to the second problem will here be offered as one which promises a satisfactory intellectual solution to the first problem. The solution adopted for the presentation of the four versions of *Clotel* is to unite them in an electronic scholarly edition. It is necessary to say something about what is meant by an electronic scholarly edition so that the theoretical implications of adopting this form may be appreciated. A critical starting point is provided by Fredson Bowers's statement on the four situations which require the expertise of the textual critic: "1) the analysis of the characteristics of an extant manuscript; 2) the recovery of the characteristics of the lost manuscript that served as copy for a printed text; 3) the study of the transmission of the printed text; and 4) the presentation of the established and edited text to the public" (Bowers VI-VIII).

Between the renditions of a work (either versions or witnesses) Bowers is identifying dynamic relationships in which versions run forwards from extant manuscripts and witnesses run backwards to lost originals. The electronic scholarly edition proposes some effective ways of presenting those movements.

Bowers's conception of the text is shaped by his notion that the ideal textual act is that "of recovering details of the lost original and reconstructing a synthetic text that is superior to any preserved form" (Bowers 18). That statement embodies a commitment to textual construction which the electronic scholarly edition of *Clotel* will not pursue. The electronic scholarly edition permits a different ideal to be realized, one presented by Ted Nelson in *Literary Machines*, and Nelson holds a position in the electronic document theory that Bowers holds in bibliographical theory. Nelson conceptualizes computer-generated documents as evolving vortices, and he de-

scribes a system which could store dynamic objects of that kind:

Such a system departs from conventional "block" storage, and rather stores material in fragments under control of a master directory indexing by time [. . .]. This method stores the document canonically as a system of evolving and alternative versions, insistently constructed as needed from the stored fragments, pointers and lists of our unusual data structure. Thus there is no "ain" version of a thing, just the ongoing accumulation of pieces and changes, some of whose permutations have names and special links. In other words, our system treats all versions of a document as views extracted from the same aggregated object. (2, 10)

With the statement that "there is no 'main' version of a thing," Nelson provides an alternative to Bowers's notion of "the synthetic text." The user of Nelson's system would scroll "in time as well as space" (2, 14-15), entering an "evolutionary structure, the docuplex," in which "the documents and their links unite into what is essentially a swirling complex of equi-accessible writing, a single great universal text and data grid, or, as we call it, a 'docuverse'." (2, 46) If the four versions of *Clotel* were combined in such a docuverse, it would become possible to read the work forward and backward. Such a format solves the practical problem of how to present the work and at the same time suggests the intellectual solution to the problem of defining the work. In the 1970s, Nelson had created the word hypertext to describe elements in his textual universe (1, 19). Present usage does not convey exactly what Nelson wanted the world to mean by his word; nonetheless, it is through some version of the hypertext that the total *Clotel* might be realized.

An examination of the story of *Clotel* will show how Brown evolved his plot and provide a justification for containing the four versions of the story in a single docuverse. The continuing theme of Brown's four editions is the dual hypocrisy of the American Republic's claim to being both demo-

cratic and Christian when it supports by law, custom and sentiment the enslavement of human beings. The continuing focus of Brown's indictment of slavery is its destruction of families. The 1853 edition has a fifty-page introduction, called the "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown." That treats theme and focus in terms of Brown's own experience. Then, in twenty-nine chapters, *Clotel* tells the stories of Curren (a mulatto slave once owned by Thomas Jefferson), of Clotel and Althesa (daughters of Curren and Thomas Jefferson), of Mary (daughter of Clotel and a white man who purchases Clotel in order to make her his mistress), and of Ellen and Jane (daughters of Althesa and a white man who purchases Althesa in order to make her his wife). Curren is sold South to die separated from her children. Clotel escapes slave-prison to die by jumping into the Potomac River while being pursued by slave hunters. Althesa's husband dies in New Orleans of yellow-fever, and as a result she and her daughters, who think themselves white, are returned to slavery by the executors of their father's estate. Althesa dies of fever and shame before she can be sold. Mary alone escapes from slavery and humiliating death, and she does so by making her way to England and finding there the brave slave from whom Southern law had earlier separated her. These daughters and granddaughters of Thomas Jefferson are of such mixed blood that they can pass for white, but they remain the slaves of their white fathers or of the white men to whom their fathers sell them.

The Curren, Clotel and Althesa of 1850 become in 1860 Agnes, Isabella and Marion. Ellen and Jane become Jane and Alreka. Mary becomes Miralda, and Brown names the new version of the novel after her rather than calling it "Isabella." The story of 1864 is that of 1860, but *Miralda* is renamed *Clotelle*. In 1867, Brown kept his 1864 text largely unchanged, but he added four final chapters to carry the action through to 1867.

The changing role of the character variously called Mary, Miralda, and Clotelle points to a major development in the evolving work. In 1853, the character called Mary is the granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson. In 1860, the character called Miralda is "a descendant of Thomas Jefferson" (*Miralda* [Jan. 19, 1861] 1). In 1864 and 1867, the character called Clotelle is the great-granddaughter of an American senator. A shift from a historical figure to an anonymous character is reinforced by a shift in the titles of the editions. The 1853 edition takes its title from a character who is a daughter of Thomas Jefferson. The 1860 edition takes its title from a character who is a descendant of Thomas Jefferson. The 1864 and 1867 editions take their titles from a character who is no relation of Thomas Jefferson. Emphasis is shifted from the hopeless tale of *Clotel* who commits suicide in America to the hopeful tale of *Miralda* who finds a new life outside America. The Old World lives of Mary and Miralda are significantly different, however. Mary's heroic slave is a mulatto named George, "as white as most white persons" (*Clotel* 222), and so Mary and George, living in England, conceal their African heritage. In 1860, Miralda's heroic slave is a man "of pure African origin [. . .] perfectly black" (*Miralda* [Jan. 19, 1861] 1), and so Miralda and Jerome, living in France, declare their African heritage. In 1864, Clotelle shows the same commitment to a man "of pure African origin [...] perfectly black" (*Clotelle* [1864] 57). In 1867, Clotelle makes the same commitment to a man "of pure African origin [...] perfectly black" (*Clotelle* [1867] 57), but the novel's ending continues beyond happy reconciliation scenes in France. Clotelle and Jerome return to Civil-War America. Jerome enlists in the Union Army and dies heroically in battle. Clotelle nurses the Northern wounded until the war's close when she becomes a teacher in a Freedmen's School, where she resides "at this writing,—now June, 1867" (*Clotelle* [1867] 114).

The fact that *Clotel* was published four times by four different publishers under four different titles suggests that there is an argument for treating the four versions as four separate novels, as has happened in publishing practice. Literary readings have privileged the 1864 text in which the form of the romance fiction becomes most fully realized (Fabi 649). Political readings have mainly privileged the 1853 text in which Brown is explicit about the role of the founding fathers in the business of slavery and their simultaneous endorsement of freedom and enslavement. The differences between the 1853 and 1860 versions represented the greatest alteration in the nature of the work. Brown removed fifty pages of abolitionist documentation, and he removed the fifty pages of the "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown." Appearing each week on the front page of *The Weekly Anglo-African*, *Miralda* was embedded in abolitionist material—reversing the construction of *Clotel* which embedded abolitionist material. At the top of its seven-column page, each installment of *Miralda* has a banner declaring "Man must be free!—if not through the Law, why then above the Law." Read in the *Anglo-African*, *Miralda* reads like the 1853 version because it is surrounded by the political, social, and moral contexts which the 1853 version carries within its covers. Read on its own, *Miralda* reads like the 1864 and 1867 versions because they tell the story as *Miralda* tells it. *Miralda* is at once a version which is so different from the other three that it stretches the meaning of the term "version," and it is at the same time the version which reveals the evolutionary identity of the four versions. In structuralist terms, the plot remains the same—the black slave child's successful and unsuccessful attempts to escape from the homes of the white slaver-father. *Miralda* shows how *Clotel* became *Clotelle*.

Another evolution took place in 1864 when the *Clotel*-story was reissued as one of "Redpath's Books for the Camp Fires" intended for the soldiers of the Union Army. The green paper



cover shows a picture of soldiers sitting round a camp fire listening to a story teller, above their heads are a rifle and a sword crossed within a wreath. By 1864, the political and moral documentary material which had filled Brown's pages in 1853 and surrounded his story in 1860 were becoming things of history. The anti-slavery battle was in progress, and the soldiers of the North needed to be kept morally as well as physically armed. James Redpath, the 1864 publisher, had been a committed abolitionist before the war began and he was not a supporter of the Republican Party or of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln presented the Civil War as a war about Union; Redpath wanted to represent the Civil War as a war about slavery. Brown's novel served Redpath's purpose.

In the ultimate, post-War, evolution of his material, Brown wanted to make a final point: the black man made as good a soldier as the white man. Brown was repudiating pre-War racism which had seen a proof of white superiority in the fighting capacity of the white man—a prejudice reflected in the docility of Stowe's Uncle Tom. In 1867, *Clotelle* was issued by the most prestigious press of any that Brown had dealt with, Lee & Shepard of Boston, and they also issued another title by Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*. This worked out, at book length and in terms of historical evidence, the theme which Brown represented fictionally through the development of the character of Jerome.

*Clotel* exists in four historically determined states. In 1853, it is an abolitionist statement directed at an English readership. In 1860, it is an abolitionist statement directed at an African-American readership. In 1864, it is a post-Emancipation exhortation addressed to the Union Army. In 1867, it is a post-Civil-War exhortation addressed to America's freedmen. The four versions of *Clotel* exist in strategic relationship to the development of abolitionist and racial politics from the period of

“moral suasion” of the early 1850s to the period of Reconstruction of the late 1860s.

There is no external evidence to say what Brown's own attitude to his four *Clotels* was. No record of his having expressed any opinion on them has been found. Also there is very little record of contemporary readers' responses to these texts. Except for some abolitionist reviews of the 1853 edition, they received no notices. No sales figures have been produced. Brown's continuing republication indicates his continuing interest, but the republications do not appear to be prompted by previous success. The 1860 reissue treats it as a new novel, not as an old one.

Any decision to identify as a superior form or master copy any single state of the text is going to prove unsatisfactory. A full reading of *Clotel* requires access to the four editions, and the electronic scholarly edition of *Clotel* will present the four versions of the text so that no one version will be more important or privileged than another. The 1853 text is first only by virtue of its place in history and takes its place alongside the other versions so that the reader can trace evolutions of the text forward to its final state (that of 1867) and backwards to its original state (that of 1853) moving through middle states (those of 1860 and 1864).

The docuverse of *Clotel* extends the work through the fourteen years from 1853 to 1867. Arguably, the docuverse might begin to be extended further because Brown reworked and recycled the *Clotel* material in a variety of other titles, most obviously in *The Escape, or, A Leap for Freedom: A Drama in Five Acts* (1858) and in *My Southern Home* (1880). But to go too far along this route would make all of Brown's many titles part of the docuverse of any one title, and that would drive the present venture beyond the common definition of a scholarly edition.

As it is, the size of the *Clotel* docuverse includes not just the full textual versions of all four editions but extends to the covers, front pages and end papers of the three novels. These materials constitute what James McClaverty calls a title's "epitext"—that onion skin of wrappers, covers, papers, and pages which has developed around the printed book (177). The same principle requires the replication of the complete issue for each installment of the serial edition, including headlines, banners, editorials, poems, articles, essays, letters, illustrations, advertisements, and column fillers. The epitextual material of the four *Clotels* has proved to be both rich in detail and valuable for interpretive opportunity. It enables the reader to achieve cultural and historical purchase on texts that lack the accompaniment of manuscripts, corrections, proofs, and letters to and from the publishers.

Readers of the re-print-text *Clotels* have had to take up versions one at a time and experience the novel as an epitextless mono-text, and though such readers may try to think of *Clotel* as a work extended through time, it is only with real difficulty that print readers can begin to read *Clotel* as a diachronic text. Electronic-text readers, by contrast, are aided in the business of text handling and manipulation by the computer so that the versions of *Clotel* can be opened simultaneously in an electronic space in which a hypertextual reading becomes possible.

Even the limited hypertext linking that has already been created for the electronic scholarly edition of *Clotel* has increased the resonance of the novel, and its stature grows as the links grow. In print terms, it could be argued that we are beginning to read a text that Brown never wrote, but it can also be argued that the meta-*Clotel* enables us to recognize that the text existed for Brown with such intensity that he manifested it four times in fourteen years, and that it evolved as he evolved, altering its social, cultural, political and racial meanings as it evolved with him and within him. There is no need

to claim that this way of reading the text is a new thing, but the electronic *Clotel* proffers readers the benefits of a self-enriching condition which amplifies exponentially as each textual element is added. The *Clotel* docuverse is a large and various information space which enables the meanings—contradictory and confirmative—of Brown's novel to be appreciated, enjoyed, evaluated and experienced in an amplified intellectual environment in which the epitextually-enriched objects contextually enrich each other. This self-reflexive, in-substantially-substantial representation of the work enables and empowers the reader so that the monochromatic hard choices of the monodimensional hard copy can be replaced by the polychromatic electronic choices of the polydimensional electronic copy. William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, the first African-American novel, then reveals itself to be a revelatory work.

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**Résumé**

***L'édition électronique de Clotel : les problèmes que soulève le premier roman africain-américain.***

*Clotel, de William Wells Brown, le premier roman africain-américain, a été publié quatre fois en quatorze ans, entre 1853 et 1867. Chaque fois, l'auteur a procédé à des modifications significatives, à la fois du titre et du texte. L'existence de quatre versions qui diffèrent considérablement pose des problèmes d'ordre théorique autant que pratique dans l'établissement d'un texte de référence. L'édition en ligne des quatre versions de Clotel fournit une réponse satisfaisante, en permettant au lecteur d'avoir accès aux quatre versions de l'œuvre, et en rendant ainsi possible une véritable lecture hypertextuelle du premier roman africain-américain.*

**Abstract**

**Creating an Online Scholarly Edition: The Problems Posed by *Clotel*, the First African-American Novel.**

William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, the first African-American novel, was published four times in fourteen years, between 1853 and 1867. Each time, the author modified the title as well as the text itself. This article focuses on the theoretical and practical problems raised by a text which has four greatly variant versions. The creation of an electronic scholarly edition of *Clotel* provides the answer to these questions by allowing the reader to have access to the four versions and thereby making a full, hypertextual reading of the text(s) possible.